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ABSTRACT

The apparent refutation by self-report studies of social class-related theories of juvenile delinquency is reviewed and challenged on conceptual and methodological grounds. Improper conceptualization and consequent operationalization of the social class dimension is considered to be the most serious contributor to the inconsistent findings. A more appropriate Underclass/ Earning Class model of stratification is suggested. Although no espirical support was found for a relationship between commonly employed socioeconomic status (SES) of father's occupation and self-reported delinquent behavior, indications are that social class is slightly more related to self-reported delinquency using the underclass/earning class model. However, there appears to be no reason to expect social class to emerge as a major correlate of delinquent behavior no matter how class is measured. (Author)

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL CLASS TO DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR: A NEW TEST

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INTRODUCTION

Self-report studies of delinquent behavior have called into question the once widely accepted belief in a strong inverse relationship between social class position and delinquent behavior. It is now a common conclusion that social class is "really a poor predictor of delinquency" (Erickson and Empey, 1965:272). This assertion does perhaps greatest damage to the so-called "strain" and "subcultural" theories of delinquency that are directed at lower class delinquency. Strain theories of delinquency assume that lower class youths aspire to "middle class goals," are frustrated by their inability to legitimately achieve such goals, and therefore turn to illegitimate means. Subcultural theories of delinquency assert that lower class youths simply have their own values and focal concerns that differ from middle class norms, and the youths are often delinquent when they follow their own values. Strain theory is typified by Merton (1957), subcultural theory by Miller (1958) and Cohen (1955). Cloward and Ohlin (1960), on the other hand, contribute to both perspectives.

Although the theories differ in some important ways, they all imply that the frequency, seriousness, and patterns of delinquent behavior should vary by social class, and that different processes lead to delinquent behavior in different social classes (cf. Cohen, 1955: 162-169). In addition, they assert that serious and frequent delinquent activities are primarily lower class phenomena. Such assertions,

however, are not consistent with the data on the relationship between delinquent behavior and socioeconomic status (SES[1]), often viewed as crucial tests of strain and subculture theories.

RESEARCH RELATING SES AND DELINQUENCY

Offficial statistics from police and court records do indeed show greater lower class delinquency. However, inconsistent police and court responses to similar deviant acts function to reduce delinquency from a variable to an attribute. Official statistics, therefore, may be more useful in our understanding of society's reaction to delinquent acts than in providing explanations for delinquent behavior.

The class-related theories predict a differential social distribution of delinquent acts due to variable pressures and norms, but they remain silent on the subject of the official labeling of delinquent behavior (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960:3). Therefore, self-report data are more relevant to the theoretical claims than are official records.

A major flaw in self-report studies, however, is that legal definitions of delinquency are often disregarded. Mere deviation from "ideals" should not be equated with the delinquency that the theories attempt to explain, defined by Hirschi as "acts, the detection of which is thought to result in punishment of the person committing them by

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It is noteworthy that "SES" is used here instead of social class. This is not an oversight, but recognition of the fact that research typically employs SES measured by father's occupation as the indicator of the social classes mentioned in the theories, a difference believed to be significant.

agents of the larger society" (Hirschi, 1969:47). Yet at the present time, the self-report studies, especially when they employ statuatory definitions of delinquency, are the most valid tests of the theories; problems of reliability and validity have been widely discussed (see for example Hood and Sparks, 1970:64-70) and need not be reiterated here.

Several self-report studies report a relationship between social class and delinquent behavior. Gold (1966) finds a slight negative relationship (for boys only) which accounts for no more than 4% of the variance. Erickson and Empey, who obtain similar results, conclude that class is "really a poor predictor of delinquency" (1965:272). The studies conducted by Reiss and Rhodes (1961), MacDonald (1969), and Gold (1963) are not comparable because they employ both self-report and official data, or reports of police contacts to label boys delinquent or nondelinquent.

Hirschi states: "careful quantitative research shows again and again that the relation between socioeconomic status and the commission of delinquent acts is small, or nonexistent" (Hirschi, 1969:66). There is considerable empirical support for this view in the literature, including tests for both boys and girls, various community sizes, numerous types of offenses, and diverse locations (Nye, Short, and Olson, 1958; Dentler and Monroe, 1961; Clark and Wenninger, 1962; Slocum and Stone, 1963; Akers, 1964; Nye, 1958; Porterfield, 1943; Porterfield and Clifton, 1946; Himelhoch, 1964; Pine, 1965; Gibbens and Ahrenfeldt, 1966; Stinchcombe, 1964; Voss, 1966; Jessor, et al., 1968; Berger and Simon, 1974; Williams and Gold, 1972; Kelly and Pink, 1973; Frease, 1973; Weis, 1973: 415; Arnold, 1965; Vaz, 1966).

Given that the frequency of delinquent behavior appears to be relatively evenly distributed along the SES scales, proponents of class views insist that the type of offenses varies systematically by SES. In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice concluded that "...especially the most serious delinquency, is committed disproportionately by slum and lower-class youth" (President's Commission, 1967:57). In 1976, Gibbons drew a similar conclusion. According to Gibbons (1976:38), the "...evidence indicates that the more serious, actionable offenses are more frequent among persons of lower socioeconomic status."

Perhaps the central argument made by scholars who believe offenses to be more serious in lower SES groups is that self-report schedules are often so loaded with "nuisance offenses" (of which lower SES youth are not presumed to be disproportionately guilty) that the results overestimate the amount of middle class delinquency. For example, Nye and Short (1956:328) purposely chose items which would be "committed by an appreciable segment of the population" in attempting to scale "delinquent behavior." They included defying parents' authority, skipping school, and driving without a license. Since these forms of deviance are undoubtedly widespread, they may tend to distort or mask SES differences in "real" delinquent behavior. The objection against nuisance offenses does not hold in all cases, however. Hirschi (1969:54) operationalizes delinquency in terms of six legally punishable offenses (for adults as well as juveniles) and finds little or no evidence of a relationship between SES and delinquency (1969:69). Gold (1966) also checks for seriousness, employing very careful methods, and finds only

a slight relationship.

The conclusion drawn by Empey (1967) is that the seriousness of delinquent acts is not related to SES. Yet the evidence does not appear to be as convincing as with the frequency of delinquent acts. Gold (1966) warns that anonymous overreporting of trivia by middle class adolescents may lead to an overestimate of their involvement in serious delinquency. Moreover, institutionalized delinquents have been found to be more serious offenders than their noninstitutionalized peers (Hodd and Sparks, 1970:58; Short and Nye, 1958). Since more official delinquents are in fact lower class, samples drawn from noninstitutionalized populations tend to reveal too little "seriousness" of lower class delinquency. Although such qualifications reduce the argument against class-related theories, the overall fact remains that there is very little direct support for these theories in the self-report data. On the surface, it seems relatively safe to agree with Empey that "social class by itself may be a poor clue to delinquency" (Empey, 1967:32).

EMPIRICAL TESTS OF CLASS-RELATED THEORIES

The most distressing point about the testing of class theories is well stated by Hirschi (1969:71):

> ...The class model implicit in most theories of delinquency is a peculiarly top-heavy, two-class model made up on the overwhelming majority of respectable people on the one hand and the lumpenproletariat on the other. The stratification model used by delinquency researchers is another thing...The group the delinquency theorist have had in mind may not be well represented, if it is represented at all.

Hence, the typical study probably does not include many of the "lumpenproletariat" or theoretical lower class. Schoenberg (1975), for example, could not include "family economic pathology" variables in his secondary analysis of self-report data, as the variances were too small to

obtain reliable estimates. Equally damaging is the likelihood that when "true lower class" students are sampled, they are probably unidentifiable as a distinct group when respondents are stratified by the SES of father's occupations.

Researchers have usually turned to father's occupation as the indicator of social class mainly because it is an easy indicator to administer in a questionnaire. The result is that most definitions of "social class" employed in research are stepladders of occupational types. The difficulty is that these measures have very little in common with the implied (or explicit) theoretical class model. Because more than one occupation category is often included in a composite "lower class," virtually every research "class" category, such as blue-collar or unskilled labor, undoubtedly includes some economically secure union workers as well as those who are destitute.

It is doubtful that any father's occupation scale -- even one dichotomizing "lower class" versus "the rest" as consistently as possible with class theories -- can serve effectively in testing these theories of delinquency. Many members of the so-called lower class will be tabulated "not classifiable" if the father is unemployed or absent. Dentler and Monroe (1961), for example, found 27% of their sample not classifiable by father's occupation. It seems unlikely that this proportion of the sample would be randomly distributed by social class. For these reasons there is a need for a revised conceptualization and measurement of social class before class propositions can be adequately tested.

THE UNDERCLASS/EARNING CLASS MODEL

Gunnar Myrdal (in Heller, 1969:138-43) has observed an American "underclass" which bears similarity to th delinquency theorists' lower

class category. He describes the underclass as "not really an integrated part of the nation but a useless and miserable sustratum." The underclass is the poverty class and its members are slum dwellers. Consistent with strain theory, Myrdal's underclass is characterized by very limited opportunity. It is not, however, defined by the SES of father's occupation; instead the definition includes a constellation of factors such as unemployment or marginal employment, lack of schooling or training, and poverty level income. It is a picture of a social class that is not very different from the traditional class-based theories (cf. Cohen, 1955).

I believe that more fruitful tests of class delinquency theories may be made if the concept of underclass is used and if father's occupation is replaced by measures such as father's work habits; that is, marginal employment or unemployed; poverty level income; and receipt of welfare benefits. So operationalized, social class may indeed prove to be significantly related to delinquent behavior.

For heuristic purposes, I shall refer to the rest of society as the "earning class" because the current evidence indicates that factors generating delinquent involvement are generally similar in families of blue-collar and white-collar earners. No claim is made, however, that blue-collar and white-collar workers in America enjoy identical life chances and life styles. Many observers caution against such dramatic conclusions (cf. Rinehart, 1971). Yet life chances are sufficiently similar among the wage earners -- in contrast to the underclass -- that the blue-collar/white-collar line may be dropped when examining class-related theories of delinquency. An underclass/earning class line is

more theoretically consistent.

Hirschi's data lend support to the importance of the underclass model to delinquency. Although he finds no relation between SES (father's occupation) and delinquency, self-reported delinquency is related to receipt of welfare benefits and to unemployment. Moreover, Hewitt (1970:77) points out that Short and Nye (1957) "found that only in their lowest stratum (corresponding roughly with our lower class) is there any evidence of a link between class and delinquency." Since Short and Nye's lowest stratum probably included some non-underclass respondents, the correlation would probably have been stronger for the "underclass" itself.

Finally, Gold's (1966:42,43) data are strikingly in accord with the predicted relevance of social class to delinquency using the underclass conceptualization. His finding of a small negative relationship between SES and delinquency is not the result of a gradual increase in delinquency as one proceeds down the SES stepladder. Rather, the relationship is almost entirely due to much greater delinquency by the lowest status boys.

To balance the scales, it should be pointed out that Berger and Simon (1974), in a representative sample of the state of Illinois, operationalized "low" class in a manner not unlike our underclass conception and found no apparent effect on delinquency. Their low class members, who were characterized by father's unemployment and consistently low father's education and occupational levels, admitted less delinquency than the higher working class in all race/sex subcategories.

Thus, while father's occupation (SES) is of little utility in the explanation of delinquency, the concept of social class and the theories

relating it to delinquency should not be discarded. There is no reason to expect class to become a prime cause or correlate of American delinquent behavior when conceived in underclass/earning class terms, but I do anticipate that such a measurement technique may show that variables usually assumed to be correlates of lower class membership, such as poverty, welfare, and unemployment, play at least some role in the causal scheme. The remainder of this paper describes an attempt to test the relationship between social class and self-reported delinquent behavior employing the more theoretically consistent underclass versus earning class (UC/EC) stratification model.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Since the purpose of this study is analytic rather than descriptive, the primary sampling criterion was to obtain a sufficient amount of variation in the key variables. Specifically, my concern was to obtain and identify an adequate number of youths who could be classified in the underclass category. The data were gathered in three Seattle, Washington high schools that were selected from areas of the city with below median average incomes. An anonymous questionnaire was completed by 734 sophmores; it was administered by researchers during all classroom sections of a required sophmore subject during one school day. Other than absentees from school and/or from the specific class period, our sample includes the entire population of the sophmore age group (93% are 15 or 16 years old) in three schools.

To guard against the possibility of interpreting sex or race relationships as class influences, data were collected on the class composition of the sex-race subcategories. Sex, race, and class (UC/EC)

are virtually independent in our sample. Only 7.9% of the entire sample are classified as underclass (N=58 of 734), with the sex-race subgroups ranging from 8.6% underclass for white females (23 of 267) and black females (3 of 35) down to 4.0% for black males (1 of 25). Our analysis therefore entails all underclass versus all earning class adolescents, as the two groups are almost identical in their age, sex, and racial composition. Furthermore, the total numbers of blacks (N=60), Asians (N=114), and "others" (N=42) are too small to subdivide into sex and class subcategories for valid analysis (for example, there is only one black, male, underclass student). This paucity of underclass respondents is due in part to Seattle's lack of a "hard core slum," the fact that I sampled only among school attenders, and the restrictive underclass criteria. But even with few underclass members, the fact that they are identifiable allows for a test of class-based propositions.

Students were classified as underclass (UC) or earning class (EC) in the following manner: Respondents who reported their parents' total income as "poverty level" or "somewhat below average" were included in the "pool" for possible underclass membership. Reports of average to very high income levels, as well as failure to respond to the income item, resulted in exclusion from underclass possibility. Care was taken throughout the classification procedure that the respondent not become "underclass" by default. Only when consistent evidence of low life chances were provided was a student classified as underclass. The goal was to obtain an underclass group that did not include children whose parents were regular earners. If classification errors occurred, they probably resulted in the inclusion of a few underclass students in the larger earning class group.

The income-based pool of possible underclass members numbered 109 (of 734) students. To remain in the underclass, students had to supply evidence of either the family's receipt of welfare benefits or the father's recent or present unemployment. The mother's recent or present unemployment was the relevant criterion in households that did not include a father. These requirements for underclass membership reduced the number of students from 109 to 80. Once again, the few who failed to respond to these items became earning class by default. It should be noted that regular workers who have not received welfare were excluded from the underclass even though the family's income was reported at the poverty level. Finally, as a check against a combination of misperception of family income and an imprecise interpretation of unemployed, another criterion was added. Students also had to supply information indicating that both parents had not graduated from college, or that both parents were not white-collar or professional/executive employees. Thus, the temporarily laid-off engineer or teacher did not qualify as a member of the underclass. These data reduced that number of students who came from underclass families to 58. This low degree of variation in social class (UC/EC) as a "dummy" independent variable will most likely attenuate its apparent relationship with delinquent behavior.

A second measure of social class -- a traditional stepladder of fathers' occupations -- was also obtained in order to ensure that any class effect found with the UC/EC measure is not simply due to a relationship in our sample. Specifically, the aim was to determine whether differences in the findings could be attributed to different measures. Because if that is found to be the case, it would indicate that class-based theories of delinquent behavior need not be rejected as they have

been in past studies.

Dozens of ways to divide father's occupation into SES categories can be found in the literature. Each has certain advantages and disadvantages. In this study, I employed Hirschi's (1969:69, 265-266) technique, mainly for the opportunity it provided for comparison or replication, as Hirschi's sample comprised primarily earning class students. Basically, the respondents were asked to name and briefly describe their parents' jobs, and I coded the responses according to Hirschi's categories. The distribution of occupational categories included: unskilled labor - 10%; semi-skilled labor - 19%; skilled manual - 32%; white collar - 14%; professional/executive - 26%,[2] with the categories scored as one through five for later analyses. The correlation between the UC/EC and SES measures of class is r=.15, significance =.001. The dependent variable, delinquent behavior, was measured by self-report items. The measure used includes only illegal chargeable offenses. Trivial misbehaviors were excluded on the basis of obscuring the conception of the dependent variable, as were the so-called status offenses for which juveniles but not adults may be legally apprehended.

It was pointed out previously that anonymous questionnaires rather than interviews were the data source. Such checklist data are often

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[2]Hirschi's SES distribution is very similar to this (see Hirschi 1969: 69). Also, these percentages are based on 581 students, as 153 (21%) failed to provide adequate information on father's occupation. This high nonresponse rate is one of the criticisms of father's occupation as a measure of social class mentioned earlier.

criticized because they encourage more careless responses with few checks against exaggeration or forgetfulness. But concealment can be an equally serious difficulty in the alternative face-to-face interview situation. The problem of possible forgetfulness and exaggeration in the completion of the questionnaires was not ignored. To counter extensive memory errors, the time frame of the items was limited to "in the past year". It was assumed that students could remember precisely or estimate accurately the number of times they had committed specific offenses within that relatively short time span without the prodding of an interviewer. To guard against exaggeration or over-reporting of trivia, I included self-administered probes for details. Immediately following reports of commissions of each offense, each student was asked to describe briefly the last such incident. This was meant to encourage respondents to "think twice" about the accuracy of their reported number of offenses. It also made possible the exclusion of trivial or nonsense responses. In sum, the advantage of guaranteed anonymity was combined with features designed to counteract the relative inadequacies of the self-administered questionnaire format.

There is a final issue in self-reported delinquency measures, namely, the distinction between frequency and seriousness of delinquent behavior. My "gut feeling" is that it probably makes very little difference which way it is measured. Frequency and seriousness are highly related to one another and, more importantly, they are similarly related to and similarly "caused by" other variables (Gold, 1966; Williams and Gold, 1972). But to be "on the safe side," and to compare the results from different measures, I developed indices of both dimensions.

The measure of frequency consists of the simple addition of the number of times the respondent reported having committed each of eight acts within the past year. The offenses include small theft, medium theft, large theft, car theft, medium property destruction, large property destruction, interpersonal violence, and attacking someone with a weapon. Each offense was scored with the exact reported number of commissions up to ten, while reports of more than ten acts of a single offense were coded as "20." It was felt that recollection of more than ten specific occasions is highly unlikely, so that most higher numbers are merely an individual's way of saying "many times," which was arbitrarily given twice the delinquent behavior weight as ten admitted commissions. The eight-item index of frequency of delinquent behavior thus has a range of 0-160. The effective range in the sample is 0-96, showing that no one simply haphazardly marked large numbers for all offenses. The majority (52%) of respondents admitted having committed at least one of these illegal acts within the past year. The seriousness scale is based on Gold's (1966) delinquency application of Sellin and Wolfgang's (1964) scale of seriousness of offenses. I excluded small theft (less than $5) from the seriousness index. Likewise, I excluded car theft if it involved a friend's or a relative's car. Otherwise, the seriousness score equals the frequency score for a given offense times the "seriousness weight" of that offense, summed across seven offenses. Medium theft ($5-$50) and medium property destruction ($5-$50) were weighted 1.0, while large theft and large destruction (>$50), "real" car theft, and simple assault were weighted 2.0. Attacking someone with a weapon with a willingness to seriously injure was multiplied by a factor of 3.0. The

resulting scale has a possible range of 0-260, with an actual range in our sample of 0-113. A total of 260 students (35%) received nonzero "seriousness of delinquent behavior" scores. The correlation (Pearson's r) between the frequency and seriousness indices is .85, significant at p=.001.

THE RESULTS

The data provide no firm evidence that social class -- no matter how it is measured -- is a salient factor in generating delinquent involvement. As shown in Table 1, the correlations between a dichotomous "dummy variable" separating underclass from earning class and frequency and seriousness of self-reported delinquent behavior are very low and marginally significant. Correlations between SES of father's occupation and those same measures of delinquency are nonexistent.

TABLE 1

Correlations (Pearson's r) and levels of statistical significance between measures of social class and self-reported delinquent behavior.

	Frequency of Delinquent Acts	Seriousness of Delinquent Acts
Underclass versus earning class	r=-.0508 signif.=.087	r=-.0786 signif.=.018
SES of father's occupation	r=-.0145 signif.=.365	r=-.0250 signif.=.276

The finding of no "SES" correlation with illegal behavior is consistent with the bulk of studies reviewed early in this paper. The lack

of an underclass relationship is more significant, for it adds a new dimension to the body of evidence suggesting that social class is not a major factor in the etiology of delinquent behavior. Eliminating trivial misbehavior from the measure of delinquency and reconceptualizing class in a more consistent manner with class-related theories should increase the likelihood of finding a social class correlation with delinquency, if such a relationship exists. Yet there is very little increase in the size of the association.

The UC/EC model does, however, alter the relationship in the predicted negative direction, especially with serious delinquency. The underclass report slightly greater involvement in such activities than do their earning class peers. In fact, for six of the eight offenses a greater percentage of underclass than earning class youth admit at least some involvement. But such additional figures are too speculative to report in detail, based on underclass sample sizes that are too small to rule out chance as the cause of the differences.

Furthermore, our low degree of variation in social class (UC/EC) should attenuate correlations from their "true" magnitude. It is a common problem; Schoenberg (1975:70) reports similar inadequacies in variation in related measures in several major self-reported delinquency studies. Further tests encompassing slum areas with larger underclass populations are needed to circumvent this difficulty. Samples including school dropouts and absentees are also needed in order to allow the ranges of social class and involvement in crime to reach their potential extremes. The measures employed here, if applied under those circumstances, could indeed reveal that social class (and therefore class-based

explanations) need not be eliminated from the vocabulary of delinquency causation. But caution must prevail. There is only a slight implication that improved methodology may reveal that the experience of being a member of the underclass leads to greater involvement in certain illegal activities. The findings of this study, and those of others who come close to operationally separating the underclass (Berger and Simon, 1974), suggest that any such relationship between social class and delinquent behavior would probably be slight in magnitude.

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